

# **JAPANESE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL RADIO MATERIALS**

**CHIKA KOJIMA TAKAHASHI**

*University of Hawai'i at Mānoa*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigated perceptions of self-instructional radio (SIR) materials by learners of English in the Japanese context and factors affecting completion and non-completion of the materials. The study found that the major advantage of the materials is that the fixed on-air schedule helps learners maintain a regular learning schedule. However, the same characteristic was perceived by other learners to be a major drawback, as these materials seem inflexible. Within the materials, the skit section was perceived to be the most useful and the most interesting, since the section provided learners with English conversations that have useful expressions in a context. For future materials, I report learners' suggestions for new sections with the goal of minimizing the drawbacks of the medium (e.g., adding a test section that confirms learners' understanding of the materials). Finally, the paper provides suggestions to the three kinds of stakeholders, namely teacher-figures, material designers and learners, as to how to lower the relatively high drop-out rates of the format. By maximizing the advantages and minimizing the drawbacks, radio materials could possibly serve as a major type of second language self-instructional materials in the era of lifelong learning.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background*

In the field of second language (L2) learning, there has been an increasing emphasis on “lifelong learning” (Hyland, 2004, p. 180; White, 2003, p. 38), and modes of learning that enhance lifelong learning are getting more and more popular. One such mode is known as self-instruction, which involves learners studying on their own without any direct institutional controls. In Japan, L2 self-instruction has been especially prevalent with the country’s major public broadcasting company (Nihon Hoso Kyokai, [NHK]) offering self-instructional radio (SIR) English-education materials since 1934 and TV materials since 1953 (Yamaguchi, 2001). As of 2009, NHK offered nine radio programs and eight TV programs, airing radio programs five days a week with reruns on the same day and TV programs mostly on a weekly basis with reruns later in the week (NHK, 2009). A learner, including adults who are not in school settings, can choose from a variety of self-instructional broadcast (SIB) materials according to his or her interests and levels of proficiency, usually at the beginning of April or October, when new series start being on-air. Widespread uses of such materials have been reported in various studies (e.g., Ohkushi, 1991; Umino, 1999; and Umino, 2005a).

In spite of the popularity of SIB materials, however, studies on L2 self-instruction have been limited both inside and outside Japan, partly because it is difficult to find out who studies with them and how they study using them, and the whole picture remains to be seen. What are the characteristics of SIB materials? How do learners perceive SIB materials? What needs to be improved in future for SIB materials to function better? Answering these questions will not only have direct impact on future SIB materials, which are used by a large number of learners in

Japan, but also have implications for other means of L2 self-instruction, both inside and outside Japan.

### *Defining Self-Instruction*

In a frequently cited study, self-instruction is defined as “situations in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without the direct control of a teacher” (Dickinson, 1987, p. 5). In this sense, self-instruction should be situated separately from supplementary aids that teachers use in addition to direct classroom instruction, and therefore NHK has made a distinction between these supplementary “Education Programs” and “Culture Programs,” the latter being self-instructional materials (Yamaguchi, 2001, p. 40).

Three terms related to self-instruction need attention in order to better frame it. First, self-direction expresses an attitude, rather than a mode of learning, where “the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions” (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11). Second, autonomous learning is “the upper limit of self-directed learning” (Dickinson, 1979, p. 183), that is, a learner becomes fully responsible for his or her learning, such as setting up an objective, selecting an appropriate material and technique, and achieving the goal. In this sense, learners using self-instructional materials are not necessarily self-directed or autonomous, since objectives and techniques are often set by material designers. Third, a term that looks at the mode of learning from a different perspective is distance education. Distance education entails the following four characteristics: “the separation of the teacher and learners, the use of technical media, provision of two-way communication, and the influence of an educational organisation, distinguishing it from private study” (White, 2006, p. 248). Distance education is distinct from self-instruction in that

self-instruction does not have characteristics such as the influence of an educational organization and provision of two-way communication. However, the two modes of learning seem to share certain drawbacks, such as isolation from teachers or peers, problems with motivation and self-discipline, and the difficulty of effective time management (White, 2003, p. 22). These all seem to derive from the lack of immediate instruction. Taking these into account, I define L2 self-instruction as a mode of learning L2 without direct institutional controls, learning usually alone but sometimes with others, with a conscious effort to learn the target language.

Furthermore, within self-instruction, there are “learner-centered” and “materials-centered” self-instructions, and the distinction lies in how much control a learner has over his or her studies. As Dickinson (1987) argues, in learner-centered self-instruction, responsibility of learning lies in learners, while in materials-centered self-instruction the teacher’s role is built into the teaching materials (p. 5). When we consider SIB materials by NHK, then, they should be defined as materials-centered self-instruction, since the time and pace of learning are decided by material providers. This type of instruction has been under criticism by some scholars that it could hinder the development of learner autonomy and that learners of self-instruction should be “regarded as a basically passive and supine being, ‘obeying’ a teaching programme” (Holec, 1988, p. 8). However, scrutiny provides a different picture as argued in the next section.

### ***Past Studies on SIB Materials in Japan***

In order to understand the nature of L2 self-instruction using SIB materials in Japan, it is necessary to look at studies both inside and outside Japan. Although the area seems particularly under-researched, studies have cumulated some common findings to be drawn. First, studies in Japan can be classified into two categories. One is relatively large-scale survey research,

showing the general trends of both users and non-users of SIB materials (Hara, 1992; Hara & Hattori, 1995; Ohkushi, 1991). The major findings of these studies can be classified into two categories: general demographic information of SIB material users, and advantages and drawbacks perceived by learners in SIB materials. First, Ohkushi (1991) reports that the highest percentage of male users of SIR materials are in their twenties, and that of female users are in their teens (pp. 48-49). For self-instructional TV materials, the highest percentage of male users are in their thirties, and that of female users are in their teens and twenties (p. 49).

Second, learners' reasons for using SIB materials are reported, such as that they can study at home, it is inexpensive, and that it is easy to make it a habit to study because programs are on-air at a fixed time (Hara & Hattori, 1995, p. 37). On the other hand, reasons for not using SIB materials are that it is not an interactive mode of learning and that it is inconvenient because of time constraints (Hara & Hattori, p. 37). These can be interpreted as advantages and drawbacks that learners perceive in SIB materials.

The second category of research in Japan comprises studies on actual use and perceptions of learners using SIB materials. One of the main studies of this category is by Umino (1999), which focuses on how SIB materials are perceived and how they are used by university students in Japan. The study finds various advantages and problems regarding SIB materials, the major advantage being "providing a rare opportunity for exposure to the speech behaviour of native speakers" (Umino, 1999, p. 318). Although this might no longer be the case in Japan because there are other means of being exposed to native-speaker input, such as podcasting, CD-ROMs, etc., it nonetheless casts light on the advantage of ample native-speaker input that SIB materials offer. The study also reports learner strategies for controlling their own studies with SIB materials that are unexpected by material designers. Such strategies include intentionally looking

away from accompanying textbooks while listening, recording programs for later practice of dictation, etc. (Umino, 1999, p. 324). These strategies show that learners are not necessarily “passive” (Umino, 1999, p. 314). In another study (Umino, 2005a) where Umino reports follow-up interviews of 20 learners from the questionnaire, she finds more in-depth socio-environmental learning-related factors that affect perseverance with these materials. The three factors reported are regularity of time and place of learning, presence of family, and goal setting (Umino, 2005a, pp. 140-146). In other words, in order to persist with this mode of learning, she argues that 1. one needs to make it a habit to study, 2. support from family is important, and 3. one might benefit more not from setting a goal that is too short-term but from “tak(ing) it easy” (p. 145), by simply listening to these materials every day.

These studies, especially the second category, are revealing in that they cast light on the learners' side and disconfirm previous research that see learners of materials-centered self-instruction as passive. However, further research is necessary for the following two reasons. First, these studies all fail to distinguish between TV and radio materials, each of which is a distinct medium of learning and has different characteristics. For instance, TV and radio materials are different in terms of the existence of visual information and the frequency of programs on-air, which, as reported in Umino (1999), do affect learner strategies and learners' perseverance with these materials. Second, although we understand learning-related characteristics of SIB materials through these studies, it is still unclear as to what specific features of SIB materials affect completion and non-completion of studies using SIB materials.

### *Past Studies on SIB Materials outside of Japan*

When we look outside of Japan, studies on self-instruction can be classified into three categories: studies using BBC materials, those using self-instructional TV Japanese-education materials, and those focusing on self-instructional packages, mostly textbook packages.

First, one of the early studies using BBC television and radio French materials is Rybak (1984). This study proposes, after discussing how one-way BBC broadcasting materials aim for two-way communication, a scheme for supporting self-instructional learners, who sometimes feel left on their own without peer support. In order to make their learning as interactive as possible, the study proposes such strategies as answering learners' questions by telephone and mail, publishing related journals, and forming study groups (Rybak, 1984). Although this study is useful for obtaining a point of departure for making self-instruction interactive, it was conducted before the "Internet-age" and some schemes can be much more easily implemented using the Internet, such as with online journals, question-answering via e-mail, and online discussion groups.

Another cluster of studies using BBC materials is Micallef (1992), Flavell and Micallef (1995), and Flavell and Fearn (1996), using BBC English radio language courses in Mozambique and Russia (as cited in Umino, 2005b). According to Umino's (2005b) overall summaries, these research reports, by using tests, questionnaires, diaries, telephone helpline, group discussion, and filming, show that BBC English radio programs seem to bring significant benefits to learners, in terms of listening and grammar performances. Furthermore, these materials are perceived by learners as means of exposure to the target language, an important advantage especially in contexts where such exposure is limited. Lastly, the majority of participants in Flavell and Fearn (1996) reports that these materials give them confidence when using English, which indicates

that SIR materials may work as a motivator.

Second, the other main studies focused outside of Japan are Umino (2005b) and Umino (2006), in which she focuses on learners of Japanese with self-instructional TV materials. The following three are the main points that contribute to the area of L2 self-instruction. First, the study reports advantages that learners see in self-instructional TV materials, i.e., they are useful for “learning pronunciation, speed, conversational expressions, structure, nonverbal behavior, contextual use, and for improving listening skills” (Umino, 2005b, p. 92). Second, sections within TV programs that learners consider to be most useful are skits and explanations of them, which in Umino’s terms are “implicit assimilation in context” and “explicit teaching of form” (Umino, 2005b, p. 96). Third, the studies report various strategies that learners develop over time, especially since with TV materials one needs to cope with “information overload” (Umino, 2006, p. 240), accepting visual and audio information at the same time. These studies again highlight the importance of looking at both materials-related and learning-related characteristics.

Third, studies on self-instruction, although not specifically focusing on broadcast materials, are of use for two points. First, a study suggests criteria for evaluating self-instructional packages, so that a variety of packages can be compared (Roberts, 1995). The criteria that are of relevance to SIB materials are composition of materials, linguistic analysis, communicative analysis and pedagogical analysis (Roberts, 1995, pp. 514-515).

Second, two articles of a study on self-instructional learners with various backgrounds, proficiency levels and target languages (Fernandez-Toro and Jones, 1996; Jones, 1998) reveal an interesting relationship between self-instruction and classroom instruction. By phone-interviewing 70 British adult learners with experience with self-instruction and analyzing the data by factor analysis and discriminant analysis, the study argues that the most effective



learning mode appears to be starting with class-work then adding or going over to self-instruction at a later stage (Jones, 1998, pp. 400-401). Furthermore, the study suggests that we need to see learner-led and teacher-led learning not as two separate modes of learning but as “interdependent” (Jones, 1998, p. 402).

Taken together, the past studies provide us with some common advantages and drawbacks of self-instruction as perceived by learners. The main advantage is its ample native-speaker input. This is especially important in contexts where the target language is not very prevalent, and self-instruction offers a rare opportunity for learners to quite easily immerse themselves in the target language.

On the other hand, the drawback that repeatedly comes up with self-instruction using broadcast materials is the high drop-out rate (Ohkushi, 1991; Rybak, 1984; Umino, 1999). The problem has not been easy to solve because, unlike supplementary aids that teachers use, we cannot force learners to keep using SIB materials, because there is no control over learners' studies. As is found in Umino (1999, p. 320), “there is no pressure to study.” Furthermore, in the Japanese context it is reported that radio programs generally have higher drop-out rates than TV programs (Ohkushi, 1991, p. 50).

Thus, although the past studies reveal some general characteristics of SIB materials, most studies, especially in the Japanese contexts, have tended to mix TV and radio, which makes it impossible to investigate characteristics unique to each medium. Furthermore, few studies have focused on specific features of the materials. Although investigating overall materials characteristics is useful, these studies fail to nail down what specific features of the materials help or hinder learning.

### ***Purpose***

The present study aims to reveal learners' perceptions of learning-related and materials-related characteristics of SIB English-education programs in the Japanese context, with a focus on radio materials and factors affecting completion of studies. NHK radio materials, compared to TV materials, are an appropriate target of investigation because of their longer history and more programs offered with greater frequency of programs on-air, yet with higher drop-out rates. Furthermore, in the era of lifelong learning it is especially relevant to investigate radio materials because unlike materials using high-technology media such as the Internet, SIR materials are relatively accessible to learners of all ages. Hence, with this goal in mind, the following three research questions were posed.

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of SIR English-education materials?
2. What features and sections of SIR English-education materials help learners to continue to study with them?
3. How can we improve SIR English-education materials so that we can help learners continue to study with them?

Answering these questions should enable us to gain insights into learners' perceptions of SIR materials in the Japanese context, and to see reasons for their popularity and nonetheless high drop-out rates. Learners' perception is of particular importance in L2 self-instruction, for it is possibly one of the defining reasons for learners to persist in this mode of learning. Put another way, if they *perceive* the materials to be useful, they are likely to keep listening to these materials, regardless of whether in fact these materials are effective for enhancing learners' L2 abilities. For this reason, I consider the study of learners' perceptions to be particularly significant in the area of L2 self-instruction, which the study aimed to clarify.

## METHODS

### *Respondents*

A total of 53 respondents served as the basis of this study. Their ages varied from 18 to 62 with a mean of 28.1. Approximately 37.7% were male and 62.3% were female. About 37.7% had experience of learning with SIR materials for less than six months, 15.1% had six months to less than a year, 11.3% had one year to less than two years, and 35.8% had more than two years. It is important to note that the respondents are those who claim to have an experience studying with SIR English-education materials in Japan and agreed to participate in the online questionnaire. Therefore, it cannot be said that they represent the population of all learners using SIR English-education materials in Japan. (Please see the *Procedures* section below for information on how the respondents were recruited.)

### *Materials*

An Internet-based questionnaire using Survey Monkey was conducted in order to find learners' perceptions of SIR programs by NHK (see Appendix A). A questionnaire is an efficient way (Brown, 2001, p. 75) of investigating overall trends and the Internet was used to make it easy for people to access the questionnaire and to raise the total number of people who answered the questionnaire. With regard to the content, first, two open-ended questions were asked in order to investigate general advantages and drawbacks perceived by learners and to find clues for improvement. Second, in order to see which specific sections of these materials learners perceive to be useful and interesting, two Likert-scale questions were administered, along with questions asking the most useful and the least useful sections and the reasons why. This was in the hope to

uncover not only learning-related characteristics but also materials-related characteristics, especially the sections of SIR materials that help learners continue with their studies. I considered that the sections learners perceive to be useful and interesting would help them persevere with SIR materials. Third, a question was asked to see what kinds of new sections learners wish to have in future programs. Questions were also asked as to why they started to listen to these materials, how long they have studied using these materials, if they used accompanying textbooks, and if they recorded the programs. The latter two questions were asked because I considered that the manner in which learners listened to these materials might affect the perceptions of learners.

### ***Procedures***

The questionnaire was first piloted with three learners of SIR materials, and was revised in order to make it focus on both overall and section-specific characteristics of SIR materials. The questionnaire was then sent out in two ways. One was via e-mail with a web link to learners in Japan through university professors, acquaintances and Japanese students at University of Hawaii during the period of October 2008 to January 2009. Respondents could click on the web link which took them to a Survey Monkey URL (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/>) and complete the questionnaire online. While it is ideal to have a complete random sampling, with self-instructional learners it is virtually impossible because no information is available as to who actually studies with them. On the other hand, it is highly possible that we come across people learning or having learned English using these materials just by chance, considering the popularity of these materials. In this study, therefore, I added at the end of the e-mail cover letter comments to ask respondents to forward the message to whoever they thought would be learning

with these materials, in the hope that it would increase the total number of respondents. The second way was through an English professor who taught four undergraduate courses in Japan. I sent 40 paper-based forms to the professor by airmail on November 5, 2008, and the professor distributed the questionnaire to all of her students in class, during the week of November 10 to November 14. A total of 16 completed the questionnaire in class, and the questionnaire was then sent back to me on November 25, 2008.

Since the questionnaire included three open-ended questions, two coders (I was one of them) first tried to independently categorize the answers to these questions in order to ensure inter-coder agreement. Then, we discussed key terms in the category and discrepancies in classification, and resolved the differences. In following this procedure, the summary of Umino (1999, pp. 318, 320) served as a guide since the study categorized advantages and drawbacks of learning with SIB materials into learning-related and materials-related subsets, and listed details of each subset. This was useful, not only for analyzing the data of the present study, but also for comparing the results of the study to those of Umino (1999), to see possible changes that have occurred since 1999.

### ***Follow-up Interviews***

In addition to the questionnaire, follow-up interviews were conducted to those who answered the questionnaire and agreed to be individually interviewed in order to gain more in-depth knowledge of learners' experiences and perceptions of SIR materials. These interviews would complement the questionnaire in terms of richness of the data (Brown, 2001, p. 78). Special attention was paid to (a) how learners actually listened to these materials and (b) what made learners complete or not complete their studies using these materials (see Appendix B for

interview questions). In total, five people agreed to be interviewed and from the questionnaire they can be characterized as advanced learners with more than two years of experience with SIR materials. The first three interviews took place on November 15 and 17, 2008 in Hawaii, since they were in Hawaii at the time. The other two interviews were conducted on December 23 and 28 in Tokyo, Japan. The fifth interview was via telephone because of distance constraint. The interviews were conducted in the learners' first language, Japanese, and translated and analyzed in English.

## RESULTS

The results show that many of the respondents used accompanying textbooks, and about a half recorded the programs. To the question asking if they used the textbooks, 46 out of the 53 respondents answered 'yes' and four answered 'sometimes,' and three answered 'no.' To the question asking if they recorded the programs, 14 answered 'yes' and 14 answered 'sometimes,' and 25 answered 'no.'

### *Advantages and Disadvantages of SIR English-Education Materials*

Responses to the question asking what they considered to be some advantages of L2 self-instruction compared to other modes of L2 learning are presented in Table 1. They are classified into materials-related characteristics, which refer to specific material contents, and learning-related characteristics, which are related to the mode of learning. In addition to SIR materials being inexpensive, the advantage that the most respondents referred to is that the learning is kept regular. Also, it is perceived that it is easy to access the materials.

Table 1  
*Advantages of Learning with SIR Materials*

	Counts	%
<i>Materials-related characteristics</i>		
They are useful for improving listening	6	11.3
They provide conversational 'authentic' language	6	11.3
Native-speaker input is provided	6	11.3
They are high-quality	6	11.3
Lessons are short	4	7.5
They are useful for improving pronunciation	2	3.8
Others	2	3.8
<i>Learning-related characteristics</i>		
Learning is inexpensive	18	34.0
Learning is kept regular	12	22.6
It is easy to access	9	17.0
Having no visual information is useful for listening	8	15.1
You can record the programs/you can listen when you want	7	13.2
You can learn at home	6	11.3
You can study on your own	4	7.5
Lessons are frequent	2	3.8
It is easy to start	2	3.8
They think about the listeners	2	3.8
You can learn with your family	1	1.9
You can practice out loud	1	1.9
Others	2	3.8

Table 2  
*Drawbacks of Learning with SIR Materials*

	Counts	%
<i>Materials-related characteristics</i>		
Lessons proceed fast	2	3.8
Compared to TV it is difficult to imagine the contexts	1	1.9
Programs are boring	1	1.9
It is not useful for reading	1	1.9
Others	5	9.4
<i>Learning-related characteristics</i>		
You have no control over time of learning	12	22.6
You have to motivate yourself to keep studying	11	20.8
It is not interactive	9	17.0
There is no visual information	8	15.1
It is easy to miss lessons	5	9.4
It is difficult to continue to study	4	7.5
There are no productive practice opportunities	3	5.7
You tend to get passive	3	5.7
There is no particular drawback	3	5.7
You have no control over the level of lessons	2	3.8
You can't catch up if you miss a lesson	1	1.9
You cannot repeat the lessons unless you record them	1	1.9
Others	5	9.4

Disadvantages that respondents perceived in SIR materials are reported in Table 2. The drawback that the most respondents answered is the fact that learners have no control over time of learning. The absence of pressure to study was also perceived as a drawback, the fact that learners need to motivate themselves to continue to study. As is reported in Umino (1999), there are few materials-related drawbacks and most of the drawbacks that the respondents perceived are related to the mode of learning.



An interesting contrast between advantages and drawbacks is that two of the characteristics are perceived by some respondents to be an advantage and others to be a drawback. First, while some respondents appreciated the fact that the programs are on-air at a fixed time, which keeps their studies regular, others perceived this inflexibility to be a drawback. Second, some stated that having no visual information is useful for listening, while others reported that it is a disadvantage that these materials do not have visual information.

### *Materials-Related Characteristics of SIR Materials*

Table 3 shows how useful respondents considered each section of the programs. Respondents agreed most on the usefulness of the skit section, with the mean score of 3.70 (4 being very useful)<sup>i</sup> and the standard deviation of .50. On the other hand, the song section ranked the lowest with the mean score of 2.86, which is still not very low, and standard deviation of .95. The difference in means between these two sections was significant at .005 level. The standard deviation was the highest for the song section, which shows that respondents disagreed most in terms of the section's usefulness.

Table 4 shows how interesting respondents considered each section. Again, the skit section scored the highest, with the mean score of 3.32 (4 being very interesting)<sup>ii</sup> and standard deviation of .67. The small talk section scored as high as the skit section, with the mean score of 3.32 and the standard deviation of .69. In contrast, the section whose score was the lowest was the composition section, with the mean score of 2.47 and standard deviation of .67. The differences in means between the skit and the composition sections, and between the small talk and the composition sections, were significant at .005 level.

Table 3

*Usefulness Perceived by Respondents, Rank-Ordered by Mean (Highest to Lowest)*

Section	N	M	SD	Response				NA
				Not Useful		↔	Useful	
				1	2	3	4	
Skit/vignette	53	3.70	.50	0	1	14	38	0
Vocabulary	53	3.53	.60	0	3	19	31	0
Repeating of skits	53	3.47	.69	1	3	19	30	0
Explanation	53	3.42	.66	0	5	21	27	0
Dictation	53	3.37	.74	1	5	19	26	2
Small talk	53	3.28	.68	0	7	24	22	0
Translation	53	3.28	.76	1	7	21	24	0
Role-play	53	3.17	.73	2	4	29	17	1
Composition	52	3.06	.93	4	8	18	19	3
Songs	53	2.86	.95	5	12	19	15	2

Table 4

*Interestingness Perceived by Respondents, Rank-Ordered by Mean (Highest to Lowest)*

Section	N	M	SD	Response				NA
				Not Interesting		↔	Interesting	
				1	2	3	4	
Skit/vignette	53	3.32	.67	0	6	24	23	0
Small talk	53	3.32	.69	0	7	22	24	0
Songs	53	2.98	.93	5	8	22	17	1
Vocabulary	52	2.92	.85	2	15	20	15	0
Role-play	53	2.92	.87	3	13	22	15	0
Explanation	53	2.88	.72	0	17	24	11	1
Repeating of skits	53	2.85	.86	1	21	16	15	0
Dictation	52	2.80	.77	1	18	21	10	2
Translation	53	2.62	.81	3	22	19	8	1
Composition	53	2.47	.67	3	22	22	2	4

These results of sections' usefulness can be confirmed in Table 5 as well, where sections perceived by respondents to be the most and the least useful are listed. The skit section was perceived to be the most useful by 39.6% of the respondents, whereas 52.8% answered that there was not a particular section that they considered to be the least useful. The reasons why they considered the skit section to be the most useful are "I can learn the basics of English conversations" "important vocabulary and expressions are in them" "I can remember expressions by listening to the skits" and "with a skit all I have to do is think about how to utilize it." In contrast, the small talk section, which the respondents considered very interesting, was perceived to be the most useful by only three respondents. The section that was perceived by most respondents to be the least useful was the song section, although by a small number. Reasons for this included "lyrics cannot be used directly in conversations," "I prefer (to learn) conversations," and "I do not understand the purpose of having this section."

Table 5

*Sections Perceived by Respondents to Be the Most and the Least Useful*

Section	"most useful" No.	"most useful" %	"least useful" No.	"least useful" %
Skit	21	39.6	0	0.0
Vocabulary	2	3.8	2	3.8
Translation	1	1.9	3	5.7
Repeating skits	3	5.7	0	0.0
Role-play	5	9.4	2	3.8
Dictation	3	5.7	2	3.8
Explanation	4	7.5	0	0.0
Composition	2	3.8	5	9.4
Small talk	3	5.7	1	1.9
Songs	4	7.5	8	15.1
Others	3	5.7	2	3.8
None	2	3.8	28	52.8
Total	53	100.1	53	100.1

### ***Improvements to Be Made in Future Programs***

Table 6 shows the results of new sections that respondents wished to have in future programs. Respondents could choose as many sections as they wished, and 67.9% of them chose the test section that confirms their understanding of the materials. Other kinds of new sections were also suggested by six respondents, the details of which are discussed in the Discussion Section.

Table 6  
*New Sections Preferred by Respondents*

<u>Section</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Test Section to see how much they understand the materials	36	67.9
Question section to teacher of the program	20	37.7
Section explaining how to effectively use these materials	19	35.8
Others	6	11.3

## **DISCUSSION**

The questionnaire and the interviews revealed general advantages and drawbacks perceived by learners, as well as features that make SIR materials attractive to learners. I will discuss them in the order of research questions posed.

### ***1. What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of SIR English-Education Materials?***

The advantage that was perceived by most learners, in addition to being inexpensive, is the fact that listening to SIR materials helps them maintain a regular learning schedule. This is also confirmed in the fact that about a half of the respondents answered that they did not record programs. At first glance it may seem counter-intuitive that the inflexibility of radio materials offered only at a fixed time of the day is seen as an advantage. This inflexibility means that unlike materials on CD or the Internet, which learners can access anytime they wish, materials

on the radio can only be accessed at the time of airing. In fact, this is one of the major drawbacks perceived by the respondents as well. However, this is also perceived to be one of the key advantages of materials on the radio. The reasons can be seen in comments by Interviewees A and B.

Well, once you miss a lesson on the radio, it's over. You could record the programs, but... If you have made it a habit to listening, it's okay, but if not, the surprising fact is that you don't actually listen to the recorded materials. (Interviewee A)

I never recorded programs. I listened in the morning before going to school. ...

Well, you think you'd listen to the program later when you record it, and actually you never do. It happened to me some times, but when I recorded programs, I guess it was less useful.

(Interviewee B)

Furthermore, specifically comparing SIR materials with those online, Interviewee D described the advantage of SIR materials in the following way.

Just the fact that it's on the Internet all the time doesn't mean that you really study with it, unless you really want to study. (Interviewee D)

Thus, the possible explanation is that whereas learners tend not to listen to the materials when they record them or end up not studying if materials are online, the fixed schedule of radio airing helps learners listen to the materials at the same time every day and get them in the habit of studying regularly.

This "regularity" of SIR materials is not confined to its learning characteristics. Interviewee B explained in the following way the advantage of materials consistently having the same organization.

Well, his program had everything organized every day, you know, like he'd have this line

“Today’s skit is such and such...” Every day we had “Today’s Expression,” and then he’d say “let’s memorize this expression, then let’s apply this expression and make two sentences.” We all knew at such point (of the program) this was coming, then that was coming,...

(Interviewee B)

Although we cannot speculate on the possible advantage of the regularity of organization since this characteristic of SIR materials was not mentioned by other respondents, the point seems worth further investigating.

Another advantage perceived by learners is that it is easy to access the materials. In contrast to English lessons that a number of people in Japan take from tutors, in either private or group lessons, learners can simply turn on the radio and start studying at home. Also, most of the accompanying textbooks cost less than four dollars a month. Thus, it can be explained that this advantage of easy-access, together with other advantages such as that they can study at home, makes the mode of learning with SIR programs especially attractive to learners.

In terms of disadvantages, this study confirmed the trend in Umino (1999) that few drawbacks perceived by learners are related to material characteristics. In other words, respondents perceived SIR materials to be problematic not in terms of material contents but in terms of their learning mode. Thus, the drawback perceived by most respondents was that learners do not have control over the time of learning. This seeming contradiction of having the same characteristics as the major advantage and the drawback is also reported in Umino (1999). One implication might be, then, that in order to help learners to continue with their studies using SIR materials, material designers need to somehow accommodate those who would like the flexibility of the time of learning and others who prefer the set schedule of learning at the same time.

The drawback that is perceived by the second most respondents is that, unlike classroom learning, they have no motivation to keep studying. The fact that there is no pressure to keep studying can be interpreted as one of the reasons of the high drop-out rates of uses of SIR materials, and minimizing this drawback seems to be a key to lower the drop-out rates.

## ***2. What Features and Sections of SIR English-Education Materials Help Learners to Continue to Study with Them?***

In considering what specific sections learners perceived to be useful and interesting, a clear picture showed up regarding four points. First, the section that respondents perceived to be the most useful is by far the skit section. The reason for this seems to be that the skit section provides learners with useful expressions used in a context, in a condensed form—some perceived that by simply listening to and learning the skits one could learn a lot.

When asked for the reasons why the skit section is useful, Interviewees A and C described the reasons in the following way.

When I think about what those skits served me for... I guess you learn the basics of conversations. (Interviewee A)

Well, it's not slangs, but I was attracted to those colloquial expressions, and I tried to memorize the expressions that I thought were interesting. So I liked the skits that had the expressions that I didn't know. (Interviewee C)

Second, the section that was perceived to be as interesting as the skit section was the small talk section, which refers to a short unscripted conversation on topics related to the major topic of the lesson among presenters in English. Interviewees D and E described in the following way what was interesting about the section.

Well, the small-talk section... You have many things you don't know about a different culture.

As a learner of English, I was interested in different cultures. And they talked about those things in English, in authentic English (in the small talk section). That was very interesting.

(Interviewee D)

I think I appreciated the information given by native speakers. (Interviewee E)

Interestingly, though, only three respondents considered the section to be the most useful. One possible explanation is that, although the respondents perceived the small talk section to be very interesting, they chose the skit section to be the most useful and did not choose the small talk section. This is understandable, given that the skit section is the main content of the programs and the small talk section only appears usually at the end of the programs or sometimes in between sections. Taken together, although this section is not the major content of the programs, it nonetheless provides learners with opportunities to listen to “authentic” conversations on culturally relevant topics in English and is a section that has the possibility of making SIR materials unique.

Third, the majority of respondents answered that there was not a particular section that they thought was the least useful—they considered all sections to be useful, saying “everything was efficiently organized,” “all the contents were efficiently organized in a short time” and “all the sections are useful, although it depends on how you make the use of them.” These results should be treated with caution, however. After all, the respondents were the ones who answered the questionnaire and those who just did not care were most likely not to have answered the questionnaire.

Fourth, out of those who did choose a section that they considered the least useful, the most chose the song section, although there were only eight people. This is in contrast to the four



people who chose the same song section to be the most useful. On the one hand, those who considered the song section to be the least useful wanted the connection between songs and conversations, as Interviewee E explained that “giving listeners some extra information in addition to just presenting songs might make the section better.” On the other hand, those who considered the section to be the most useful said that they would be motivated by the section. In order for this section to function better, then, there should be a clear explanation of the purpose of having the song section, if it serves just as a motivator, if it is useful for conversations, etc.

### ***3. How Can We Improve SIR English-Education Materials So That We Can Help Learners Continue to Study with Them?***

There are three kinds of improvement that can be drawn from the questionnaire and the interviews. Those are related to (a) how to maximize the advantages, (b) how to minimize the drawbacks, and (c) what kinds of new sections learners would like to have. First, one needs to consider how to maximize the advantages of SIR materials. Learners perceive these materials to be advantageous in their fixed schedule, being easily accessed, and being full of useful conversational expressions. Therefore, if learners can get themselves into the habit of studying on a daily basis over a long period of time, they are most likely to benefit from the materials.

Second, for future improvement one needs to consider how to minimize the drawbacks. For example, if one has difficulty tuning in to the radio every day, since it is very easy to miss a lesson and there is no pressure from peers or teachers, it becomes quite easy to drop out of a course. Therefore, a course of improvement is to compensate for this non-existence of learning pressures and to deal with the ways of making learners not miss a lesson.

One strategy on the learners' side is mentioned by Interviewees A and D, who consider

having their family and friends listen to the same materials helped them continue with their studies.

Having a learning peer, on one hand, kind of forced me to listen, but, on the other hand, made it possible to talk about it later with them. You know you could discuss it later and if the same thing appeared later in the news, we'd say "this we learned!" Or, we'd watch a movie and if an expression that we learned in a program appeared, we'd say, "we learned that!"

(Interviewee A)

Well, my neighbor kids and my neighbor "Big Sister" listened (to these materials). And they recommended me to listen. We gathered and studied together, using the accompanying textbooks. ... (Listening to SIR materials) was very interesting, and I enjoyed memorizing the skits. It was also good that there were friends who listened with me. (Interviewee D)

Another way on the production side might be to have the materials accessible in means other than the radio as well, although this would not be a solution with the use of radio per se.

Interviewee B suggested having compensatory means, that "making programs downloadable might help."

Third, a possible new section that 67.9% of the respondents wished to have is a test section confirming learners' understandings. Interviewee A gave a comment on why such a test section would be perceived by learners to be useful.

Nowadays (Japanese) people like those certificate exams of all kinds.

I think people want to test themselves. I think they want to know where they stand in terms of level. (Interviewee A)

Although this is a comment from an advanced, probably successful learner, and it cannot be applied to all learners, the comment nonetheless casts light on the usefulness of the test section

for those who are motivated enough to start learning English in the self-instructional mode. The test section is in a sense supplementary to the drawback of SIR materials not being interactive. Learners cannot interact with those on-air and have no place to confirm their understanding of the contents. A test section, therefore, would serve as a tool for learners to test their output and confirm their improvement, which then may serve as a motivator for learners to keep studying.

Six respondents suggested other possible new sections, which all seem to compensate for the drawbacks of SIR materials. First, sections were suggested so that learners can interact with teacher-figures and others on-air. For example, one preferred to have a section where learners could participate in making their own skits and presenting them on-air. Second, some sections were suggested in order to make the contents closer to “authentic” materials. For example, one suggested a section where they introduce lines from movies or TV dramas that are related to the vocabulary introduced in the programs. Another suggested that the main section of the program could be a recording from real conversations, rather than skits, that include background noise. Although the feasibility of providing these authentic materials still leaves room for question, one can interpret these sections to show that learners would like to know how much they understand the materials and that the materials are useful for real-world communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

One major limitation of the study is its sampling. First, the number of respondents was relatively small. Second, the method was a self-report by those who claimed themselves to have had an experience with SIR materials. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the results reflect the

perceptions of the population. Furthermore, those who agreed to be interviewed had the experience of learning with SIR materials for more than two years and all of them reported that they were advanced learners, claiming to have the experience of listening to the most advanced programs such as *Business English*. This bias may have led to an imbalance of opinions reported in the study, and a further set of interviews with those who actually dropped out of SIR materials after a short period of time would reveal more. Lastly, partly due to the small sample size, I was only able to analyze the overall patterns of perceptions, without investigating possible patterns in respondents' perceptions depending on their proficiency levels or length of their studies using SIR materials. Ideally, future research should employ a larger sample, focus on learners who can be verified to have experience using SIR materials, and investigate more detailed patterns of perceptions.

For future research, following are some possible research questions that were not covered in this study but merit investigation.

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of SIR materials in contexts outside of Japan?

One could replicate this study in context other than Japan to see if patterns similar to those in this study emerge. Knowing more about materials targeting languages with varying prevalence in different countries will enable us to have a more complete picture of L2 learning using SIR materials.

2. What will happen to the drop-out rates and learners' perceptions of SIR materials if the changes suggested in this study are actually implemented? It will be interesting to do a replication study if and when these changes take place.
3. How do learners develop using SIR materials? It is crucial to focus not only on learners' perceptions, but also on the developmental aspect of their learning with L2 self-instruction. It

will be fruitful, therefore, to conduct a longitudinal study using such techniques as observation, learners' journals, and tests.

### ***Implications***

Limitations aside, this study revealed learners' perceptions of SIR materials in the Japanese context, and these perceptions provide suggestions with regard to ways of lowering the high drop-out rates from these materials, which are reported in various studies in the literature (Ohkushi, 1991; Rybak, 1984; Umino, 1999). I will discuss the implications to be drawn from the study both in theoretical and practical terms.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study specifically investigated learners' perceptions regarding SIR materials of English, a relatively prevalent language in the Japanese context. The study makes it clear that when discussing L2 self-instruction, any study needs to clarify the exact nature of self-instruction that it is investigating. For example, the major characteristic perceived in this study, namely the fixed on-air schedule of materials, turned out to be crucial in broadcast materials but is irrelevant when investigating, for example, L2 self-instructional materials available only online. Also, within SIB materials one needs to distinguish materials that have different frequencies of airing, which is likely to affect the characteristic of fixed schedule. This point has not been clarified in many past studies (Hara, 1992; Hara & Hattori, 1995; Ohkushi, 1991, Umino, 1999; Umino, 2005a) and should be clear in future research.

Furthermore, the study calls for a rethinking of the advantage of native-speaker input. Although in some studies (e.g., Umino, 1999) this was considered to be one of the most important advantages of SIB materials, this was not the case in the present study. As is discussed in Umino (2005b), whether native-speaker input is perceived to be an advantage partly depends

on the prevalence of the target language. For English materials in the Japanese context, it is not that native-speaker input is not an advantage. Rather, it may well be that because English is prevalent compared to other foreign languages, native-speaker input was not perceived to be a notable advantage by the majority of the respondents. Future studies, therefore, need to be cautious about the prevalence of the target language in a given context. Unless the points above are clarified, research is likely to blur the picture when investigating factors affecting learners' completion of their studies and the possibility that L2 self-instruction serves as a way of enhancing lifelong learning.

Lastly, the practical implications to be drawn are different for the three stakeholders of L2 self-instruction: teacher-figures, material designers, and learners.

For teacher-figures, the results suggest that they need to consider not only the purpose of having each section but also how to make these purposes transparent to learners. The results also make suggestions as to ways of enhancing interaction with learners and ways of checking learners' understanding of the materials.

On the material designers' side, there are two implications drawn from the study. First, material designers should consider very carefully what time of the day they program each set of materials and should not change the schedule over a long period of time. Beginning courses targeting junior high school students, for example, should be programmed at the time when it is natural for them to listen—probably not too late in the day. In contrast, materials targeting seniors should probably air early in the morning and late at night (as one popular radio program in Japan among seniors, “Midnight Radio,” is on-air after 11 p.m.). Furthermore, it is important not to change the schedule over a long period of time, so that learners can make it a habit to listen to these materials at the same time every day. As one respondent complained, recent

programming tends to change too easily; both the lineup and the schedule of these programs have been changing every year. This is counter to the advantage of the fixed schedule of SIR materials, an advantage shared by few other means of L2 self-instruction. In order for material designers to help learners continue with their studies using SIR materials, they need to plan well and keep the schedule of programs.

Second, materials should also be available in other means, preferably online, so that those who miss a lesson can catch up before going on to the next lesson. This way, material designers will be able to get learners in the habit of studying regularly without too many of the learners dropping out of a course.

Finally, on the learners' side, it is important to consider the following three points. First, learners themselves should be aware of the advantages and drawbacks of SIR materials. As discussed above, while these materials do let learners study useful expressions used in a context and immerse themselves in native-speaker input, they do not allow learners to have their output checked by teacher-figures. Learners are most likely to benefit from the materials when they are aware of what they intend to get out of the materials, since a mismatch is likely to discourage learners and have them possibly drop out of a course. Second, it would be helpful for them to find their own tactics of making it a habit to listen. These could be, for example, listening to the materials with family or friends, or writing journals to see their progress. Third, learners should be aware of what the advantages and drawbacks of recorded materials are. As confirmed both in this study and Umino (2005a), recorded materials are most likely to function only as a back-up, since learners often fail to listen to them. And, when they record the programs, the key advantage of SIR materials, namely the regularity of materials offered, disappears. Therefore, learners should consider why they record materials and when exactly they intend to listen to them. After

all, in the self-instructional setting, learners are the ones to take advantage of the materials. They should take the most advantage of SIR materials offering programs on a regular basis with relatively easy access, and be aware of what they can and cannot do with the materials.

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**APPENDIX A:****SIR Materials Questionnaire (translated from Japanese)**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to investigate how radio English-education programs are perceived, and is designed for people who have listened to or are listening to NHK radio English-education programs. This is being done as part of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of Hawaii. The data obtained will be used only for the better understanding of radio English-education programs.

It will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire.

-Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the questionnaire anytime you wish.

-The findings of this study will help us understand NHK radio English-education programs and self-instruction.

-The questionnaire is anonymous and individuals will not be identified.

(Numbers will be used to conceal the identities of respondents.)

The data obtained will be treated by the researcher with absolute confidentiality.

-To the researcher's knowledge, there are no potential risks or discomforts involved in this study.

-If you have any questions, please contact the researcher, Chika Takahashi, at (e-mail address here) or by phone: (phone number here).

-If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Hawaii Committee on Human Studies at [uhirb@hawaii.edu](mailto:uhirb@hawaii.edu).

-If you happen to know anyone with an experience of studying English using SIR materials, I would appreciate your forwarding this message to them so that they, too, can participate in this study.

Please access the questionnaire at the following URL.

(URL shown here)

1. Gender:        MALE    FEMALE

2. Age:

3. Occupation: 1. student    2. business    3. self-employed    4. housewife    5. other

4. What is the reason for listening to /having listened to NHK radio English-education programs?

5. How long in total have you listened to such materials?

Less than 6 months    6-12 months    1-2 years    more than 2 years

6. Did you use accompanying textbooks when listening to the programs?

Yes    Sometimes    No

7. Did you record the programs?

Yes    Sometimes    No

8. Compared to other means, what do you consider to be some advantages of this mode of learning?

9. Compared to other means, what do you consider to be some problems of this mode of learning?

10. Which sections do you find useful / not useful? (Please circle the number that best describes the degree of usefulness that you attach to the item on the left.)

	Usefulness				
	USEFUL			NOT USEFUL	
Skit / vignette	1	2	3	4	N/A
Vocabulary (Words & Phrases)	1	2	3	4	N/A

Translation of skit	1	2	3	4	N/A
Repeating skit	1	2	3	4	N/A
Role-play	1	2	3	4	N/A
Dictation	1	2	3	4	N/A
Key point explanation	1	2	3	4	N/A
Composition	1	2	3	4	N/A
Small talk among presenters	1	2	3	4	N/A
Songs	1	2	3	4	N/A

11. Which sections do you find interesting / not interesting? (Please circle the number that best describes the degree of interest that you attach to the item on the left.)

	Interest				
	INTERESTING			NOT INTERESTING	
Skit / vignette	1	2	3	4	N/A
Vocabulary (Words & Phrases)	1	2	3	4	N/A
Translation of skit	1	2	3	4	N/A
Repeating skit	1	2	3	4	N/A
Role-play	1	2	3	4	N/A
Dictation	1	2	3	4	N/A
Key point explanation	1	2	3	4	N/A
Composition	1	2	3	4	N/A
Small talk among presenters	1	2	3	4	N/A
Songs	1	2	3	4	N/A

12. Which section did you think is most useful for learning English, and why?

(Please choose ONE.)

Skit / vignette

Vocabulary (Words & Phrases)

Translation of skit

Repeating skit

Role-play

Dictation

Key point explanation

Composition

Small talk among presenters

Songs

Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_ )

Reason:

13. Which section did you think is least useful for learning English, and why?

(Please choose ONE.)

Skit / vignette

Vocabulary (Words & Phrases)

Translation of skit

Repeating skit

Role-play

Dictation

Key point explanation

Composition

Small talk among presenters

Songs

Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_ )

Reason:

14. What new sections of the materials do you wish there were? (Please circle all that apply.)

- i. Question section to teacher of the program
- ii. Test Section to see how much you understand the material
- iii. Section explaining how to effectively use these programs
- iv. Others (Please specify below.)

15. Thank you very much for filling out the questionnaire. In order to gain more in-depth insights for the issue, I am planning an interview in December in Tokyo. If you think you can cooperate with the interview, please provide your e-mail address below. It will take about 30 minutes, and I will give you a small gift.

## APPENDIX B:

### Interview Questions

#### Basic English-Learning Experiences

- Length of listening to SIR materials
- Specific programs that you listened to (if you remember)
- Other means of English-learning experiences, including experience in English-speaking countries
- TOEFL/TOEIC score, if none, how would you rate your overall English proficiency level?

#### Ways of Listening to SIR Materials

- Did you listen to such materials alone? Where?
- Did you record the programs? If you did, when did you actually listen to them?
- Did you use accompanying textbooks? Did it help?

#### Advantages and Drawbacks of SIR Materials

- What made you listen to such materials in the first place?
- What do you think is the best advantage?
- What do you think is the problem?

#### Features of SIR Materials That Help/Hinder Completion of Studies

- What was your favorite section of the programs? Why?
- Did you find any sections boring? Why?
- Did you find any difficulty continuing to study with the materials? How did you overcome it?

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<sup>i</sup> Original Likert-scale question was asked the other way around, with 1 being “very useful.” However, in order to make the picture clearer, I switched the numbers so that 4 would mean “very useful.”

<sup>ii</sup> Same as above (4= “very interesting”).